

Broken Glass in Film City

by Felicia Grünbaum Powell-Jones

I am five years old, standing in my father's kitchen. I look out over the room: a strange, adult perspective, as if I am channeling someone else, or another time. A warm red light covers the scene, and in this total stillness, it glows, hums, imperceptibly yet unquestionably alive. Perhaps there is something about the pose of my body? Straight back, head turned sharply: do five-year-olds stand like this? Nothing has happened or is about to happen, but I keep coming back to this moment. This place betrays some out-of-reach truth, a shadow puppet cast across a wall by hands I long to take into my own.

In the beginning of the 1920s, when my birth country of Sweden was experiencing a golden age of cinema, the studio lot Filmstaden (Film City) was built to accommodate the increased production. Before, the place had been an ostrich farm, supplying the public with plumes for their hats. Now, it would be the center of one the most advanced studios in Europe, and the market for ostrich plumes would come to a standstill, perhaps forever. Later on, after the Second World War, Ingmar Bergman would film here.

By the time my father and I move to Film City, it is long abandoned. Still, there are distinct areas, all empty: studios, workshops, offices. The emptiness of these monuments astonishes me: the way they seem to turn against the oppressive rationality we exert upon the world. How can rooms be left on their own? As I explore, I feel the pull from each new space I enter; energy, as real as anything else, seems to long for me just as much as I do for it. Dusty and startlingly bright in the desolate summer light, untended gravel roads link everything together. There lingers a spectral sense of activity, production, interaction, echoes of voices in connection and conflict, in the way these roads bind and separate the spaces of this miniature ghost town, like a set of an impossible Scandinavian Western. It exists for a few blocks, and then it all ends: the town, the set, the world. And once I've left, walked out of frame, I find myself grasping at the fraying threads of beginnings and ends, raging at the idea that there are any at all.

I am five years old, and before I fall asleep, my father tells me a story that he makes up as he goes. We are discovering it together, twisting and turning through roads within

his mind. Sometimes I think we end up in places he didn't know he had access to, and that now, through the reality of magic, build themselves within me. It's continuous. It goes on from one night to the next, and after I've fallen asleep, he adds notes, drawings, and maps in a thick, unlined sketchbook.

Our house is the least beautiful structure in the area. I have a strong feeling that no matter what, we would have ended up with this house. My father would have chosen it, wanted it, claimed it, because it is the strangest, most fantastical, odd, irreconcilable house. With six flat, white sides, distinctly not house-dimensional, it is peculiar, enormous, alien—somehow, put into place by a glitch in the timelines. A chest—of toys, of war—or a casket.

At its center is a room totaling over 2,000 square feet; its ceiling is high enough for several floors. On one end of this room is our living space; it is two floors, kitchen downstairs and bedrooms upstairs. On the other side is my father's studio, covered with paintings, set pieces, strange experiments with glass, plastic and building materials (he especially favors the type of insulation that comes in a can, which is sprayed on and then swells into grotesque metallic pink tumors), and a shocking amount of fake plants. A dystopian dreamscape garden, filled with Roman busts made out of styrofoam and plastic vines that seem to come out of every dark corner and spread, growing at night when no one is watching.

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It is 2022, and I am in New York taking part in an exchange program with NYU. In the mornings, I look out toward buildings layered so deeply that they kaleidoscope in the windows of subway cars. On the streets, strange and wild winds blow from one side of the city to the other. I feel like my father, who has spent his life moving from country to country, leaving versions of himself behind in every place. For one of my classes, I see a show at Soho Rep called *Wolf Play*. In it, a young child is given up by his adoptive parents and then readopted. The child adopts a persona—the Wolf—who is better suited to navigate the harsh, unforgiving conditions: "Wolves are an extremely adaptable species. They can survive in the arctic, in the swamps, deserts, caves"—and also "kitchens" (Jung).

I am five years old, and we live in this peculiar box. I have one cat, Chico, and two rabbits, Ada and Richard. They live like us, free to roam the expanse of the house, and because they are not castrated, we will soon have more. I try to name them all, but when we have twenty-three rabbits, I even give up counting. In the room most visibly affected by the rabbit onslaught, in a little forest fire born from their imminent and ongoing electrocution, sits the television. The remote control has no buttons, only uneven little gray stubs left from the meticulous attention of their brittle,

disconcertingly long teeth. Live wires stretch across the floors because rabbits will nibble on all plastic indiscriminately. They tear wallpaper from the walls, ripping strips of it off in jagged triangular patterns so that the lower edges of the walls look like the silhouette of a tiny forest, backlit as if on fire. In my father's styrofoam jungle, rabbits sometimes fall into things they shouldn't and drown in large vats of strange liquids. A chest — of toys, of war — or a casket. Light projected through glass.

The 1995 animated film *Balto* is inspired by the true events of an Alaskan dog sled expedition organized to bring medicine to a group of children affected by an outbreak of diphtheria. Balto, a half-dog, half-wolf hybrid, is not allowed to join the party, considered untrustworthy and dangerous by humans, dogs, and himself alike. He lives among the outcasts, not welcomed as a dog, nor able — or willing — to live as a wolf. The expedition fails when the medicine-filled sled goes over a ravine. All hope is lost. When the news travels back to the village, Balto's friend, a Russian-accented goose named Boris, encourages him to set out on a solo rescue mission: "A dog cannot make this journey alone. But maybe a wolf can" (00:47:30-00:47:48).

I am five years old and my father lets things happen that other parents don't. He forgets to feed me, sure, but in my room there is a white cupboard filled with candy saved from birthday parties (it is a peculiar shape, a chest — of toys, of war — or a casket) from which I feed myself. He also lets me drive the car, a rusty burgundy Range Rover, which he sometimes drives up hills so steep I feel like I am lying down, the weight of my little body pushing back against my seat, seatbelt slackening as the pressure against it subsides. He lets me paint the walls of the kitchen. Not in a particular color, not to help him or to learn something, but to be free, to create, to exist in chaos, to absolve myself of the structure and boundaries that are so important to other people.

There is no beginning or end to the colors that spread across the walls, no reason, no meaning. Only the action of change, of being, of spreading something from the depths within yourself outward to meet the world, as if you were not already there.

At the film's emotional climax, Balto traverses the snow-covered ravine to find the sled, bearing medicine, at its very bottom. Looking up toward the nearly vertical cliffside, the task of recovering the medicine seems impossible. Suddenly, a wolf howls in the distance. It appears, becoming visible through the thick snowfall, and steps forward. Balto is frightened, hesitates. The wolf pauses and turns away. Its paw prints are visible in the snow and Balto reaches out, placing his own paw in the wolf's tracks. Even though the wolf is almost twice his size, his paw fits perfectly. He throws his head up and, for the first time, howls into the snowstorm; the wolf returns to howl with him. There is a turn in the music: it becomes darker, more terrifying. At the same time, however, it triumphs, full of love, of hope. Alone, Balto pulls the sled up the side of the

ravine, his oversized paws allowing him passage through a landscape inhospitable to dogs (00:58:05-01:00:37).

I am five years old, standing in the kitchen. I am very happy, but also very sad. I know I will never be as happy as I am in this moment. There is nothing going on. Nothing out of the ordinary has happened or is about to happen. I am alone. But I feel myself on the precipice of expanding myself, and I know, somehow, that there are things you cannot come back from. It is still quite simple, where I still am. But in front of me, and for the rest of my life, lies an awareness of how complicated my little life is; and now it moves toward me, and here it is, like the notes of a song from a party in another room. I wonder where I begin and end, where the lines between our selves and the rest of the world sit. Sometimes, when I think of story – of sound, of love, of terror – I feel my edges fraying in the most intoxicating way.

The animated Balto is in love. He is in love with a dog, and afraid, since his identity is fractured, that he does not deserve a relationship with someone who appears whole. During one of their most memorable interactions, during something like a date, Balto gathers broken glass and projects their reflections onto a wall (00:22:23). Northern lights.

Wolves hold an interesting status in our collective consciousness. A wolf pack symbolizes unity, relationships, and strength in numbers, while lone wolves represent singularity, individuality, loneliness. Wolves also represent a wildness and ferociousness: they are an other to the domesticated dog that is connected to them. And then there is the idea of being raised by wolves, wild yet socialized, like Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*. A couple of thoroughly disseminated, yet widely contested research papers also propose the idea that wolves live in rigidly structured social hierarchies. In reality, wolf packs are almost exclusively made up of families, in which the parent wolves act as leaders (Kjørstad). And in “In the Company of Wolves,” a short story adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood*, Angela Carter writes, “The long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its fearful resonances, some inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition” (112).

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Not long ago, my roommate asked if I wanted to walk with her to the Brooklyn Public Library, close to our apartment in Crown Heights. The weather was changing drastically every day, so that one morning I’d step out in blistering heat, panicky sweat building in seconds under my ankle length wool coat, and the next morning the wind would be blowing so hard that I’d lose sensation in my fingers on the walk to the subway. This was the latter kind of day.

We are getting to know each other, my roommate and I. She is in therapy, and I have been, so our conversations sometimes fall towards our childhoods. This day, deep in a horrible grayness and whipping chill, I tell her something I haven't intended. It is as if the struggle of the walk, which has become more of an arctic exploration than a pleasant stroll to the library, has turned my mind over in strife, as if it somehow replicates the circumstance of its body. She compliments me, I think, saying something very nice, because she is very nice, about my temperament or attitude. I tug at my jacket lapel, wrapping in more tightly as we walk, straining against the wind. "I didn't always use to be," I say, with a specific brand of pathetic nobility.

"What do you mean?"

There's a suggestion of weightiness in her voice, in her question, and in the thickness of the quiet that is left for me to fill. I find that I don't want to tell her, and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to, or with what. The thing that comes out is an oversimplification, a bastardization, a retreat to something other than truth.

"I guess I was kind of a bully."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I was a really scared and confused kid, and I found some power in scaring others."

She considers my words, mouth tight, eyes cast downward. I feel at once as if I have lost control of three things: what she thinks of me, what I think of me, and what I am. I'm panicking, wanting to make myself understood, wanting to demand empathy for a part of myself I normally offer to no one.

For the longest time, I only really became close with people who I had identified as damaged in some way. My mother jokingly called the girl group I formed in my early teens, after my father had moved out of the country, the Society for Daughters of Absentee Fathers. Each one of us was afflicted in different ways: adoption, unknown paternity, death, and in my case, abandonment, although this, too, is an oversimplification. The few examples of wild wolf packs that exist outside of the family constellation are of groups of young wolves that band together. They hunt, live, and depend on each other to survive until they grow up and can disperse into their separate lives (Kjørstad).

I am five years old, and I awake alone in the house. Somewhere near me, in Film City, a building is on fire. It's empty, like the other structures here, but as I make my way over, in that part of night when time collapses inward, pulling everything towards

nothingness, I find not only my father but a group of other men. I have the strangest feeling that he woke me, that he'd brought me here to watch it burn. And then the flames overtake the walls, replacing them, no longer casting shadows against anything at all.

In 1968, Bergman's film *Hour of the Wolf* premiered. Some say the title comes from Swedish folklore, while others contend that the concept was Bergman's own. Bergman describes it as "'the hour when most people die, when sleep is deepest, when nightmares are more real. It is the hour when the sleepless are haunted by their deepest fear, when ghosts and demons are most powerful. The Hour of the Wolf is also the hour when most children are born'" (Bergman qtd. in Ebert). It was, in part, filmed at Film City (Bergmans Filmstaden).

Today, Film City is once again animated by the lives of people. The local government tore down many of the buildings, including ours, opting to build new apartments. I've looked at images of these places: white walls, gray couches, and clean, minimalist modern artwork reproduced on posters and set in Ikea frames. There are green plants (real), in just the right, normal amounts. Insulation is kept inside walls, invisible but still cancerous. These images strike an unnerving chord upon my memories of this place. But time goes on. Everything changes. It is the static, the sameness, that is the illusion.

When we move, my father sets the rabbits free. The ones that survive the harsh Swedish winters procreate and spread throughout the area. People that know me well, and know this story, will think of me when they see a rabbit in the north-western part of Stockholm. And they'll wonder if the rabbit they are seeing is a descendant of Ada and Richard.

We tend to attribute meaning to final sequences. We care deeply about the endings of stories we've followed for some time. In some endings, like the famously ambiguous conclusion of *The Sopranos*, the protagonist's life hangs in the balance, his future undecided, so that each person invests in the fantasy, and a million possible versions are splintered into being. Whether or not Tony Soprano survives, the viewer does. Like television, we go on. We go on from disappointment, from disaster, and from death – from the million ends we meet and the million possible futures we don't. We reconfigure ourselves, our narrative, and the vision of our story that stretches, perhaps not out in front of us, but into us. We fragment and fray. We compose and create. We are victims, perpetrators, witnesses, and judges; we are wolves.

Much time has passed since I sought only the company of other fractured people. I know now that I am at fault for believing there were people who were not. But now and then, in the eyes of someone that believes in fantasy, in all that is strange, fantastical,

odd, and irreconcilable, I see a certain wolfish gleam, a light reflected from broken glass. Northern lights.

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